

*Remarks of Leah Neumann
Special Education Teacher
Ridgefield Public Schools*

Submitted to the Education Committee
On Senate Bill 24, Sections 28, 29 and 31
Teacher certification, evaluation and salary

February 21, 2012

Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Education Committee, my name is Leah Neumann and I am a product of the Connecticut school system. I attended Ridgefield Public Schools from Kindergarten through high school. Because of the influential teachers in my life, I am now an educator in the Ridgefield Public Schools.

After college, I decided to teach in Hawaii. I thought it would be the best of both worlds: I could do the job that I love while working in one of the most desirable places in the world. While teaching in Hawaii was certainly one of the most amazing experiences of my life, it wasn't Connecticut. I soon realized that I needed to find my passion from the teachers who instilled it in me. I needed the dedication, the professionalism, and the inspiration that I loved here in Connecticut.

While I will not speak for all teachers, I can say that the teachers I work with are phenomenal. We all have the same goal: We want the students to learn in a safe and stimulating educational environment. As teachers, we get excited to challenge students while at the same time using different approaches for the various learning styles of a wide range of students. We spend countless hours planning and evaluating to ensure there is student learning. We constantly strive to do our best in hopes that we can instill the same into our students or our future teachers.

With all of this being said, I would like to address the education reform bill which is currently being considered. Certainly, it is accurate in saying that there needs to be a change in the education field. Just like all other occupations, the teaching profession should also be looked at. After having reviewed the draft for this bill, I have found many positives which I was hoping for. Such positives include: Focusing on low performing schools to close achievement gap, raising the standards of teacher preparation, creating local models of innovation, improving access to early childhood education, creating a career ladder for master teachers, and moving from workshop-generated CEU's to effective professional development programs. Clearly, there are many advantages to the passing of this bill.

While there are many positives to passing the education reform bill, I am growing more and more fearful of some of the negatives. First, I fear the elimination of certain requirements to teach such as completing the 36 hours of special education coursework and having a Master's degree. As a special education teacher myself, I have been so impressed with the knowledge that my colleagues have of how to teach students with special needs. This background education has been vital in the classrooms and continues to be necessary with the growing population of those with special needs. A Master's degree is another component which worries me for the future of education. While my undergraduate classes were informative, my Master's program is where I applied a great deal of my learning. In my Master's courses, I had the experience of teaching and wanted to learn more and share with others in my class. I learned more from other teachers and their experiences than most can learn in an undergraduate program. I learned strategies and skills from people in that program that I continue to use in my classroom today. By eliminating the Master's requirement, we would be getting rid of a key component to a teacher's education. If the bill passes as it stands right now, I believe the future of our students will be hindered by under qualified teachers.

Another part of the bill that worries me is that instead of using existing salary structures, Connecticut would be using an evaluation system, based in large part on standardized test scores, to determine teachers' certification level and their salaries. As a special education teacher, I am extremely worried about this. Each year, I have students with wide ranges of abilities and disabilities. How is each year going to be fair for me to "compete" for the Master certificate? Also, how many teachers will be "teaching to the test" rather than finding the passion they have inside them and teaching to all multiple intelligences? If you could think back to your most effective teacher, was it the one teaching you how to write a perfect expository essay about Shakespeare or was it the teacher who had the class act out the parts in *Julius Caesar*? Would you want your child to have the teacher who gives students five common themes that can always be found within a story or do you want your child to have the teacher who teaches the students how to visualize and become a part of the novel? The bottom line here is that if standardized tests will be helping to define the salary advances, then I am afraid that the future students will miss the love of learning.

With all of this being said, let's not forget about the children and our future. Whether or not this bill passes as it is, I will continue to teach to the best of my ability just like all of the teachers I know. Let's not forget about our future educators and the reasons people decide to become teachers. If I hadn't had the inspiration from the teachers I had as a child, I have no idea where I would be today. Let's keep the passion of teaching and the love of learning alive in Connecticut.